

Leave it!

Teach your dog to stop stealing food.

By Andrea Arden

Like most dogs, Gerber, a 2-year-old West Highland White Terrier, is always busy looking for new sights, sounds, and smells. Of course, most of the time he is trying to track down food, whether it's in his bowl, under the dining room table, or, most recently, on the coffee table in the form of some delicious chicken wings.

"We were just about to sit down when Gerber snuck up to the table and grabbed a mouthful," says one of his owners, Robert Craig of Portland, Ore. "I yelled at him, but he just ran off to another room to finish his snack."

Hunting for a valuable resource like food is as natural for dogs as it is for us. So, it should come as no surprise that Gerber makes this his No. 1 occupation. However, a dog should learn to have good impulse control, even around food. That is, Gerber should learn to think before grabbing at food, and he should be taught the "Leave it" command so his owners can let him know when certain things are off-limits.

Manage the situation

As in any training situation, the first step is managing the situation to prevent the undesirable behavior until your dog learns how to behave.

In this case, the Craigs agreed to keep Gerber on-leash when they were home and supervising him. This way, he could be safely tethered near them while playing with a toy.

Once the Craigs became experts at management, they didn't yell at Gerber for mistakes because he wasn't making any. Screaming at him to "Leave it!" only taught him to steal food and other goodies only when he thought his owners weren't looking. He also learned to be a little nervous around the Craigs. "I think he has become sort of sensitive to my voice,"

Robert Craig says. "Now, even when I yell for him to come, he looks at me like, 'Is this one of those times he's mad at me?'"

With management under control, the Craigs were ready to begin to teach Gerber the "Leave it" command. I asked them to set aside two five-minute, quiet training sessions at least twice a day for one week. During these sessions Gerber was on his 6-foot leash attached to a stable object. He was under control, and the Craigs had their hands free for training.

Teach "Down"

Seated on the floor next to Gerber, they asked him to lie down. If your dog doesn't already know the command, hold a tiny treat in your hand at the tip of its nose and slowly lower it to the ground between its front paws. When it follows your hand to the ground, give the treat.

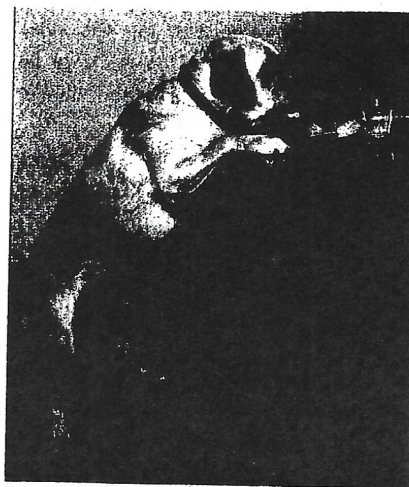
Teach control

Once it is lying down, hold a treat in each hand. Lower both hands to the ground at the same time, one right at its nose and the other about 12 inches in front of it. Let your dog take a quick lick or nibble of the treat from your hand, then lift both hands about six inches off the ground and then right back down again.

Repeat this up-and-down motion 10 times.

Next, place the hand farthest from your dog down about half a second before putting down the hand closest to it. Repeat this 10 times, rewarding your dog with a little treat each time it ignores the treat farther away and waits for the hand closest to it to come to the ground.

If your dog gets up, simply cover the treat on the ground with your hand so it can't get it, lure it back into the down position, and try again.



THOMAS SCHAEFEGES/LABRADOR RETRIEVER

Use the 'Leave It' command to keep your dog from stealing food.

After 10 repetitions, place the hand farthest away down one second before the hand closest to your dog. Again, reward your dog with a tiny treat every time your hand closest to it goes to the ground. This way, your dog begins to learn that controlling itself — ignoring the treat farther away — is rewarding.

Increase the time between your hands coming down to two seconds, then three, four, and so on.

Add the command

Pretty soon, you will be able to place a bit of food on the ground 12 inches from your dog for seven to 10 seconds, and it will stay down and ignore it, waiting for its reward from your other hand. At this point say "Leave it" as you put the food on the ground. Your dog will start making the connection between the words and the behavior of ignoring something.

Practice putting different types of food on the ground. Then try putting the food closer and closer to your dog. You can also toss the food on the ground rather than gently placing it there. According to Craig, "Gerber is so good now that even if a piece of food drops off the counter while I am making dinner, he can leave it!"

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